Kingdom and Creation from Jesus to Paul: Does the New Testament Give Us an Ecological Mandate?

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When we turn from Jesus to Paul, it could at first sight look as though we move from a relatively concrete creation-related view of salvation in Jesus' teaching to a much more spiritualized and individualistic view in Paul. We move from the big concept of the kingdom of God to the narrower concept of justification.

However, to suggest this is at least to oversimplify.

(i) Kingdom in Paul

In the first place, it is worth saying that the 'kingdom' concept has not disappeared in Paul: it may not be prominent in Paul's epistles, but it is there, and, despite some scholars' contrary views, it is there in a form that is recognizably similar to the teaching of Jesus as reflected in the gospels. I have in mind verses such as I Cor 6.9,10: 'Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God?' (Note the assumption that the teaching is well-known and compare synoptic verses such as Matt 5.20), I Cor 4.10: 'The kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power' (compare the association of the kingdom with miraculous power in the gospels, e.g. Matt 12.28), Rom 14.17: 'The kingdom of God does not mean food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit' (compare the synoptic teaching on externals/internals in Mark 7 and parallels, also the association of the kingdom with righteousness and the Spirit). Other Pauline kingdom texts include I Cor 15.24, 50; Gal 5.21; Col 1.13, 4.11; I Thess 2.12; II Thess 1.5.[1]

Paul does not use kingdom or kingship language very much in his epistles, perhaps because he found it less useful in his Greek urban context than other ways of speaking of salvation; but he was not ignorant of Jesus' kingdom teaching, nor did he reject it.

(ii) Righteousness in Paul

It is not insignificant that two of the Pauline texts quoted above connect the kingdom with righteousness, since Paul's teaching about righteousness/justification has more in common with Jesus' kingdom teaching than may sometimes appear.

When Paul speaks of righteousness/justification he is certainly interested in individuals, men and women, being justified by God through faith. But it is a mistake to suggest that Paul has a narrow individualistic view of salvation which contrasts with Jesus' bigger view. As scholars have urged on us very forcibly in recent years Paul's primary concern in many of the passages which speak of justification is with the Jew-Gentile issue, i.e. a social as much as an individual issue; he is arguing for the internationalism of the gospel. And if Ephesians is a reliable guide to Paul's thinking, even this is only a part of the story, since the international people of God are for the author of Ephesians a sign and a model of God's greater purpose for the whole world (1.10; 3.9,10). But we shall come back to that point.

Paul's justification language should itself not be too narrowly conceived. Rom 1.17, where Paul speaks of the 'righteousness of God' being revealed, is, of course, a much debated and discussed verse, with some scholars and translations insisting that the 'righteousness' is the righteousness that comes *from* God to those who have faith (cf 1.17b, Phil 3.9), and with others arguing that it is God's own righteousness that is revealed in the gospel, whether this righteousness is thought of as his justice, his goodness in salvation, or his covenant faithfulness - or all three. Much can be said in favour of both interpretations of the phrase, not least because Paul in Rom. 3.26 speaks explicitly of the death of Christ showing God to be righteous and making us righteous. There is much to be said for taking the expression 'righteousness of God' as a deliberately large concept.

Ernst Käsemann in his Romans commentary argues for precisely such a large view of the 'righteousness of God' in Paul.[2] He speaks of divine righteousness having a 'field of radiation and a place of manifestation' in Jewish and Pauline thought and of God 'bringing back the fallen world into the sphere of his legitimate claim... whether in promise or demand, in new creation or forgiveness' (pp 28, 29 or 25, 26 in the original German). This explanation of Paul's thought enables us to bring together the two views of the 'righteousness of God' discussed above - God's own righteousness is established in Christ and we are drawn into its 'field of radiation', being made righteous. And of particular interest to us in this paper is the cosmic/creation language used by Käsemann in connection with divine righteousness.

Käsemann's understanding no doubt has its limitations. But the view that Paul, when speaking of the revelation of God's righteousness, has in mind not just the sorting out of individual sinners but the coming of God's eschatological righteousness promised in the Old Testament, is supported not only by the language of revelation used by Paul in 1.17 (*apocaluptetai*) and by Paul's insistence that his gospel is the fulfilment of Old Testament promise (1.2), but also by the way that Old Testament passages, such as, for example, Isaiah 61, make so much sense of Paul's thought.

Isaiah 61 is the famous passage that begins 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...', and it is strongly associated with Jesus in the gospels (cf Luke 4.18ff). But the particular interest for Pauline studies lies towards the end of the passage, not least in the climactic last verse 'As the earth brings forth its shoots, and a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord Yahweh will cause righteousness and praise to spring forth before all the nations' (61.11). Here explicitly is the hope and promise of righteousness to come in the future. The vision in the chapter is of the year of the Lord's favour (v.2), and the prophet speaks of the restoration of Zion, of the Gentiles acknowledging the work of God (and of their wealth coming to Zion, v.6), of God's justice and judgement on evil (v.8), of the making of an 'everlasting covenant' (v.8), of the people of God being clothed with the garments of salvation and with the robe of righteousness 'as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels' (v.10). The beautiful vision of restoration in the chapter is one that ties in very closely with aspects of Paul's thought - with the themes of judgement, salvation, and covenant all being expressed. The vision is of God himself acting in righteousness and of God making his people righteous. Significantly from the point of view of Paul, it is a vision that includes the Gentiles (even the wealth of the Gentiles; should we make a cross-reference to Paul's collection for the saints in Jerusalem?) and indeed that comes to a focus in the promise that God will cause 'righteousness and praise to spring forth before all the nations'. (For the importance in Paul of praise and giving glory to God see, for example, Rom 15.9-11 and, negatively, Rom 1.21).

Paul does not quote Isa 61.11 as his text in Rom 1.17, but it is thoroughly plausible to see passages such as this behind Paul's righteousness/justificaton language. Among other striking texts are Jer 23.5,6, where the coming 'righteous branch', who will execute justice and righteousness, is named 'The LORD our righteousness' and Jer 33.14-16, where the same name is given to Jerusalem. When Paul speaks of God's righteousness being revealed, he means - we suggest - that the day for the fulfilment of such promises has come: in Christ God's own righteousness has been demonstrated, and through Christ his righteousness is being established among his people ('justification') and in his world.[3]

The importance of this argument about Old Testament background for our theme is suggested by our earlier quotation from Käsemann. If Paul in speaking of righteousness/justification has this Old Testament background in mind, then we are in the same circle of ideas as with Jesus' kingdom language - significantly - and that circle of ideas is not just to do with personal salvation, but with restoration of the people of God, the gathering in of the Gentiles, indeed the reconciliation of the world and of new creation.

(iii) Christ and creation

That Paul thinks in such broad terms is confirmed by his comparison of Jesus to Adam (in Rom 5, I Cor 15, and probably Phil 2). The quite extraordinary claim that Jesus - a man who lived and was crucified in Palestine only a few years previously - is a second and greater Adam, indicates that Paul thinks of Jesus and his work as of massive significance. Jesus marks a new beginning for the human race and for the world. Or, to use Paul's own terminology, Jesus' coming is all to do with 'new creation' It is no accident that Paul uses precisely that terminology to describe the work of Christ in Gal 6.15: 'Neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation' and in 1 Cor 5.17: 'If any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold the new has come'.

In both of these passages the focus is on human beings and human society being transformed. Paul is interested in people being changed into the image of Christ, the new and glorious Adam (II Cor 1.18), and in the new order where the old prejudices and inequalities are abolished (Gal 3.28; but note that in Pauline thought restoration of creation does not mean the abolition of sexual differentiation, since that and the 'one flesh' nature of marriage are part of the created order, I Cor 11.1-16, 6.12-7.11, Eph 5.21-33, I Tim 2.13). It may be worth adding here that the phrase 'new creation' would not necessarily suggest the restoration of the old creation; it could suggest a totally new start. But although Paul does emphasize the newness of Christ and the superiority of Christ to Adam, nevertheless there is continuity with what has gone before: words like 'transformation' and 'redemption' come to mind. When there is 'new creation' in a person's life, that person is transformed and redeemed, not scrapped and replaced!

But is Paul interested in a broader redemption of creation? His apparently dismissive remark in I Cor 9.9 about the ox - 'Is it for oxen that God is concerned?' - might seem to show that his vision is only for human life. Animals, flowers and other non-human parts of God's creation do not feature prominently in Paul's

teaching, and we may surmise that the urban Paul was nothing like so close to nature as was Jesus.

And yet Paul is not totally oblivious to the creation: in Rom 11 there is his parable of the olive tree and in I Cor 15 his discussion of different types of bodies - seeds, birds, fish, etc.; he can speak in that passage of the 'glory' of terrestrial things.

Paul is certainly not only interested in what we might call the 'spriritual' as opposed to the physical side of life. Although we do not find much explicit reference to physical healing as a part of his ministry and this could seem to set him apart from Jesus, still in Rom 15.19 he does refer to how he ministered in word and deed by the power of signs and wonders' and in II Cor 12.12 he asserts in response to his critics that 'the signs of a true apostle were performed among you in all patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works'. We may reasonably infer from these texts that Paul was familiar with the gospel tradition about the disciples being sent out with authority to heal and cast out demons (e.g. Matt 10/Mark 6/Luke 9 and 10, the Q form of this discourse also being quoted by Paul in I Cor 9.14), and that he saw his minsitry as in continuity with Jesus' ministry in this respect.

Paul certainly sees it as the Christian's task to glorify God in the body, and he firmly rejects the views of those who want to minimize the importance of the physical (Rom 12.1, I Cor 1.12ff). He specifically rejects the asceticism of those in Corinth and elsewhere who would forbid marriage (though he recognizes the value of celibacy for those so gifted; cf. I Cor 7). He believes that 'in Jesus' the old food laws that divided Jew and Gentile have been abolished, and he strongly resists those who try to impose the old food laws on the Gentiles (though he emphasizes the need to welcome those of tender conscience; cf. I Cor 7 and 8, Rom 14.14; cf. Col 2.21-23). Paul would have been happy to own the words of I Tim 4.3,4 where the author denounces those who 'forbid marriage and enjoin abstinence from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving... For everything created by God is good...'

And the decisively important evidence for Paul's interest in the physical is the already quoted chapter, I Cor 15, since it is all about the question of bodily resurrection and Paul is keen to assert the reality of Jesus' resurrection and to show that it is the 'firstfruits' of the resurrection of God's people as a whole.

But it is to Romans 8 that we most naturally turn for evidence of Paul's vision for creation in the broadest sense. Here he speaks primarily about the redemption of God's people, but he specifically associates it with the redemption of creation. He speaks of the creation waiting with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of

God: he explains that the creation itself was subjected to futility - no doubt a reference to the Fall and the story of creation - and that creation has been 'groaning in travail together until now'. Paul says that on the coming day 'the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God' (vv 19-22). Here in Pauline terms is the 'community of creation'. There is community now as we groan together; there will be community in the future freedom of the children of God.

Paul's vision of salvation thus includes the created world'. Indeed it includes everything: the work of Christ is to defeat all the enemies of God, including that last great enemy, death (I Cor 15.25,26). Paul does not speak of exorcism, but he shares the gospels' view of Jesus' mission as one having cosmic dimensions and involving the defeat of cosmic evil (e.g. Rom 16.20, Col 2.15, Eph 6.12). Jesus came to bring everything back into subjection to himself, and so to bring everything back into subjection under God (I Cor 15.25,26, quoting from Psalm 8). The author of Ephesians faithfully expresses this Pauline vision when he speaks of 'the mystery of God's will according to his good purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fulness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth' (1.9,10). Cosmic harmony - cosmic reconciliation and restoration - are the divine purpose, which God has set in motion in Christ. It is in the church that the divine plan begins to be demonstrated and worked out as Jew and Gentile are reconciled in the new united humanity of Christ.

(iv) Ecological mandate in Paul

Whether or not our speculation about a Psalm 8 background to Jesus' Son of man terminology has anything in it or not, Paul explicitly thinks in terms of Jesus the new Adam who is to exercise dominion over the world, and he undoubtedly has what we could call an ecological vision, in that his eschatological hope includes the renewal and restoration of creation. It may seem less obvious that his teaching also gives the church an ecological mandate in the present. However, Paul does not see the work of bringing all things into submission to Christ as something purely future; on the contrary it is being worked out in the present in the church, for example in the reconciliation of people to God and in particular in the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile to each other in Christ. Christ's work of reconciliation is entrused to the church: there is a commission at that level, and the church also has a ministry of physical healing in the present (cf. I Cor 12.9,10).

Given this framework, it is not wishful thinking on our part to see implicit in the teaching of Paul, as in that of Jesus, a mandate to care for the creation that God has

made and is going to restore. The glorious liberty of creation to which Romans 8 points is something future, like the resurrection of our bodies; but, just as we have a responsibility to our physical bodies and to the physical welfare of others in the present, so by analogy we have a responsibility to the created world.

Concluding remarks

So yes, there is an ecological mandate in Paul as in Jesus.[4] To be more accurate, it is a creation mandate. This may be worth emphasizing, since the modern ecological movement is sometimes associated with a deification of nature and with a theology that is far from Christian. The framework for a Christian approach to ecology must first be theocentric: we must beware of elevating the creature above the creator and of exchanging the glory of the immortal God for the worship of mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles (cf. Rom 1.23,25). It must, second, give supreme value to human life: the biblical tradition does not see man as just one of the animals, but as having a very special relationship with God and place in his purposes. It is not just because ecological questions were not as pressing in New Testament times as today that we find the focus of Jesus' ministry and of Paul's teaching to be on human life rather than on ecological things; it represents a priority in God's creation and purposes.[5]

However, to say that Christian thinking insists on the priority of the worship of God the Creator and on the special place of humanity in the created order is in no way to weaken the ecological mandate: indeed it is precisely because the Christian believes in the creator - the one who has made everything good (through Christ the 'first-born of all creation', Col 1.15), the one who sent his Son into the created world, and the one who will ultimately redeem creation - that the Christian believes in the goodness of creation, has hope for its future and is committed to its welfare in the present. And it is precisely because human beings are called into relationship with the creator as sons and daughters - as fellow-heirs with Christ - that we have the motivation and the responsibility to act as God's vice-regents and to care for his creation in a way that is not selfish but reflects the love of the one who made it and us.

Notes

1. On kingdom and righteousness in Jesus and Paul especially useful recent treatments include two chapters in A. J. M. Wedderburn's *Paul and Jesus*, Sheffield, JSOT, 1989, pp. 99-144, and also G. Johnston, "Kingdom of God" Sayings in Paul's Letters' in *From Jesus to Paul*, Waterloo, Wilfrid Laurier, 1984, pp. 143-156.

2. *Commentary on Romans* London: SCM, 1980.

3. Mr. M. Newman has drawn my attention to Psalm 72, designated a Psalm of Solomon in the Masoretic Test - note our earlier comments about Solomon in Section 6. It is significant in associating the king, righteousness and material prosperity.

4. As so often, Paul turns out to have a great deal more in common with Jesus than might at first appear. Although care must be taken not to blunt the distinctiveness or originality of either Jesus or Paul, Paul was less of an independent thinker and more of 'a slave of Jesus Christ' than is sometimes recognized.

5 The ecological mandate, of which we have spoken, is no substitute for the preaching of Christ or for the missionary mandate to 'make disciples of all nations'. Ecological sin and ecological salvation are indeed part of the Christian message, but only part. If we fail to keep the person of Christ and the need for spiritual restoration through him central in our theology, then we are not being true to the New Testament or the Christian tradition, and we are offering people a partial and inevitably ineffective message.

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Letters